

# THE DICTIONARY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## Introduction

People are of different opinions when they are asked what to learn in learning a foreign language. There was a time when learning a foreign language meant learning first and foremost learning the words, that is to say a person who learns a foreign language had to compile quite a number of words and learned their meanings in terms of their equivalents in his language; and his proficiency in the language learned was judged by the number of words he knew.

Although not many people now subscribe to such a concept of learning a foreign language, many people believe that a person will not go far in his learning the language if he has only a very small number of words. He may, in a simple way, be able to speak with a native speaker in everyday situations but to the best of the writer's belief he will run out of stock, and soon he will feel that he needs more words to express his ideas. This feeling will come home to him especially when he comes to reading. It is all very well when he reads only the kinds of books that are used at school, but as soon as he plunges himself into an original piece of writing, he will find himself not up to the task. He will feel that he is lost. At his stage of learning, the piece that he is reading makes him confused. He realizes that he needs to learn more words.

The preoccupation with words was then abandoned and gave way to that with structure or grammar. A person is said to have learned a foreign language when he has mastered the fundamentals of the language automatically, that is to say, he can use the language in everyday situation in a very limited vocabulary. This tenet has led to the emergence of a new approach which owes its existence to Fries(1945), one of the prominent advocates of what was commonly referred to by the term aural-oral approach. In its hey day the teachers paid much attention, if not too much, to structure to the neglect of words ( although the textbooks used will not give that impression when one really examines them in detail). This period produced speakers who were good at using the language with good pronunciation and were glib in every day conversation but many of them had nothing more to say when they came to serious discussion owing to the poor mastery of words.



At present under the influence of new findings and advances in linguistics kindled by Chomsky's theory of Transformational Generative Grammar(1957) many people condemn the too mechanical way of handling the teaching of a foreign language. A new approach to foreign

language learning has come into being but unfortunately the practicing teachers are confused by the multiplicity of meanings of the word which has some bearing with communication: "communicative". It seems that the word has a different meaning when it is used by Widdowson (1978) from that when it is used by William Littlewood (1981). However many teachers still continue teaching in the old tradition with new books emphasizing the structure mastery.

The previous statement is only impressionistic not borne out of solid facts, but a little experiment with one's sons or daughters who are still at the secondary schools will, the writer believes, make him come round to the impression that not enough attention is given to the teaching of words. Surely words in language teaching are used in the artificial classroom situation but they are not seriously taught. Consequently not much attention is given to the use of a dictionary. The last word in the previous sentence suggests in what direction the writer is going to write. He is not going to write about the teaching of words in the SMP or in the SMA. He is going to talk about the place of a dictionary in foreign language teaching. It must be borne in mind that the discussion is superficial, light and meandering without a clear line of thought and definite system of attack.

### **When to Use a Dictionary**

A beginning language learner of a foreign language at school will not think of a dictionary when he is in a foreign language class until he comes home and does his homework by himself. He will realize that some of the words explained in the class room have gone out of his mind. But students are of different attitudes toward the words the meanings of which they have forgotten. Some will not take the trouble to ask other people about them. Some will sit down and do what they can and feel no worry about their assignment. Some other students will not stop asking or looking them up in their dictionary until they get what they need to know. But the majority of them will not look up the words in a dictionary the meaning of which they do not know, knowing for sure that their friends are no better than they are, and that the teacher will not ask them about the meanings of the words since he will be concerned with the teaching of a



structural word or a pattern. The implication is that unless the teacher pays attention to the meanings of the words in a lesson and makes sure that his students know them well, few students will look them up in a dictionary.

It is quite natural for the teacher not to pay too much attention to the meanings of individual words since he is concerned with how to say things in a situation in English. Besides he does not want to give the impression that in learning a foreign language the most important thing for the students to do is to know the words.

Surely the teacher may not disregard the meanings of words in his teaching. Ignoring the words will have a greater danger to the future development in learning a foreign language. That is to say the students will at some point in the future altogether stop learning it simply because the foreign language they are learning will have been deprived of meaning. In short it will be meaningless to them. No one will learn anything meaningless.

At the beginning stage the meanings of words must be supplied by the teacher for the following reasons. At this stage

- (1) the use of a dictionary slows down the pace of learning
- (2) the students need to know the meaning of whole sentences
- (3) attention should be given to the mechanics of the language
- (4) the mechanics of the language is still a great problem to them.
- (5) looking up the meaning of a word in a dictionary is not a simple matter.

When does the dictionary come into play in the process of

learning a foreign language after the first stage of learning at which the students are able to manipulate the fundamentals of the language within a limited vocabulary. One may ask how many words there are in a limited vocabulary? The writer will not give a definite number of words, for people are of different opinions about it depending on their belief and experience. It may be set at 850 words if one subscribes to Basic English or at 1000 words of the Little Language or at 1250 words as Michael West recommends in his Learning English in Difficult Circumstances.



At this stage the learner is ready to expand his knowledge and develop his limited mastery of the foreign language he is learning. At this stage he understands the structural as well as the lexical meanings of the words he knows and is in a position to be benefited by his capital

knowledge. He cannot stop at this limited vocabulary if he wants the new language to be of service to him, for within the limited vocabulary he will have much difficulty to understand a book in that language which tends to be more and more difficult to understand with the increase of the vocabulary level. The more extensive the vocabulary in a book is the more difficult it is for him to understand. He still has to enlarge his vocabulary to about 3500 words or 3600 words for comfortable reading. With that number of words in his vocabulary, his mastery as well as his knowledge will constantly grow so far as he does not stop reading a book in the new language.

But Long before this point in the learning process the dictionary must have been introduced. Otherwise the students will be reluctant to use a dictionary. It cannot be expected of the students to use a dictionary. The use of it will not come easily to him. Like other forms of habits the use of a dictionary is the result of pleasant, rewarding acts. This points to the necessity of teaching the students to use a dictionary and make them work with a dictionary. It must be borne in mind that this work must not be a toil, a burden that will make them learn unwillingly.

### Mono-lingual Dictionary

What dictionary to use is sometimes a question to decide on. A teacher who has made up his mind to teach the students to use a dictionary is confronted with a choice of a bi- or a mono-lingual dictionary. A teacher who is accustomed to using a bilingual dictionary owing to the previous learning or his own preference and those who cannot use a monolingual dictionary will surely not ask the students to use a monolingual dictionary. He is not faced with the problem of the choice of what dictionary to use. When confronted with the choice the writer would take side with those who decided on a monolingual dictionary. The underlying reason for this attitude is that (it should be kept in mind that the student has about 800 or 1000 words at his command) the students are able to read sentences in simple English. At present there are many dictionaries designed for foreign students. In such dictionaries the entries are explained in relatively simple English, some even limit the words in the explanations to words of high



frequency. The quotations below show the kind of English used in the dictionaries.

"This is a Dictionary that has been specially prepared for the learner of the English Language. All its parts have been designed and put together to give the learner the most practical help in developing the three language skills: speaking, writing, and reading."

"This is a Dictionary of the learner of English who has mastered the rules of English grammar and pronunciation, and has acquired a vocabulary that enables him to read and understand English of moderate difficulty." (Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary of Current English)

"All the definitions and examples in the dictionary are written in a controlled vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words which were selected by a thorough study of a number of frequency and Pedagogic lists of English,.... only the most "central" meanings of these 2000 words, and easily understood derivatives were used" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English p.13)

"The dictionary is written in ordinary, everyday English. There are only a few special symbols to understand and they are explained below." (English Language Dictionary p.vii).

Even a dictionary intended for native speakers can be used by foreign learners because they are, too, written with the students as users in mind. The Holt Intermediate Dictionary has this to say in the introduction :

"The definitions have been carefully graded to meet the needs of Students with a wide range of abilities; the high frequency words needed by the younger students are presented with utmost simplicity,..." (H.I.D p.4a)

To get a clearer picture of the kind of English used in the definitions and explanations of the entries some examples are set below . The words are the first words on p.100.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English :

- branch 1. arm-like division of a tree, growing out from the trunk. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English:
- bless with - be favored with; be fortunate enough to possess.

The Hold Intermediate Dictionary of American English:

- bucket container to hold or carry water, milk etc.;

English Language Dictionary:

- bank loan

- a bank loan is a sum of money that a bank

lends you for a period of time and that you have to pay back with interest

It will not do justice to the dictionaries if we conclude from only one instance of explanation or definition above that the definitions and explanations in the dictionaries will be beyond the student's comprehension, considering the stock of words that they have acquired, for the words like "arm-like division", "trunk", "container", "loan" may not readily lend themselves to easy understanding of the meaning of the entries. Surely there are many definitions and explanations of this kind in the dictionaries. There are, however, many entries whose descriptions and explanations the students can readily understand. Nobody will deny that the explanations of the word "club", the first word on page 200 in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, are easy to understand.

(1) a society of people who join together for a certain purpose, esp. sport or amusement: a working-men's club/a cricket club

(2) a building where such a society meets

(3) a heavy wooden stick, thicker at one end than the other, suitable for use as a weapon

(4) a specially shaped stick for striking a ball in certain sports.

And the following are the explanations of the word "cram" on page 200 in Hornby's Dictionary.

(1) make too full; put, push, very much or too much into

(2) fill the head with facts (for an examination)

(3) commit facts to memory (without serious study)



With some introductory reading guessing-game lessons using a Dictionary which will be used in the comprehension classes the students can be trained to work with the dictionary.

It would not be a wise for a teacher to make a decision that the students should use a bilingual dictionary on the ground that clear understanding of word meaning rests at the bottom of reading comprehension. If it were the case the history of foreign language teaching would take a different course. There are some arguments which can win over the teacher to the contrary decision.

- (1) the descriptions and explanations in such dictionaries are not totally unfamiliar to the students. So the students has the feeling of "I have been here before", a feeling which is very important for successful learning.
- (2) the words meaning depends on the company of words they keep.
- (3) the use of a bilingual dictionary will strengthen the bonds between the two languages which will make it more difficult for the students to break off. And this is quite the contrary to the true nature of foreign language mastery.
- (4) The student will be so accustomed to using a bilingual dictionary that he will be unwilling to use a monolingual one, although he knows that it provides more information
- (5) A monolingual dictionary may provide reinforcement of remembered words recently taught or read in a book

These arguments, the writer hopes will persuade teachers to take advantage of the mono-lingual dictionary, encourage and teach the student how to use it and make them always work with a dictionary until it comes home to him that a dictionary is indispensable for better learning. The writer also hopes that the students of the English Department will be recognized from the mono-lingual dictionary that they take with them on their way to

### **Which Dictionary to use**

Faced with a choice of two mono-lingual dictionaries intended for foreign learners a teacher will select the one which to him is a better dictionary for his students. His choice may be based on the following considerations

- (1) the dictionary should contain enough entries for his students.

- (2) It should indicate the pronunciation of the entries with symbols which are not unfamiliar.
- (3) It should give the frequent meanings of the entries
- (4) It should give examples or phrases or sentences in which the entries are used.
- (5) The language used in the explanations and descriptions should be simple and easy
- (6) It should explain its grammatical properties
- (7) It should employ simple phrase or sentence structure
- (8) It should contain idiomatic expressions
- (9) It should give the status of the word (standard or non-standard, formal or informal or colloquial).

There are of course other considerations which are not very important, for examples of money, durability, size of the letters.

In the following paragraphs the writer will compare two dictionaries by setting out the explanations or descriptions of some words. Both dictionaries are mono-lingual and both are designed for foreign learners. One of them is Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (I) and the other is Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (II). The explanations and descriptions which are compared are those of the words which are found in the following paragraph: "As we enjoy great advantages from the inventions of others,

we should be glad to serve others by any inventions of our own....  
advantage

- I (1) (C) sth useful or helpful, sth likely to bring success, especially in competitions
- (2) benefit; profit
- II (1) An ADVANTAGE is 1.1 something that puts you in a better position than other people. 1.2 a benefit or improvement that is likely to result from something.
- (2) ADVANTAGE is the state of being in a stronger or better position than others who are competing against you.
- (3) In tennis ADVANTAGE is used to refer to the first point scored after deuce in a game of tennis



The so phrases with the words "advantage" in I are :

have /gain / win an advantage (over) or give sb an advantage : have /give a better position or opportunity

- have the advantage of : know sth or sb that he does not know
- take advantage of somebody : deceive him

In II these expressions are explained in the following way

- If you have the advantage over someone, or something gives you the advantage over them, you are in a better position than they are
- If you take advantage of someone, you treat them unfairly or deceive them for your own benefit
- If you turn a situation to your advantage, you act skillfully and manage to gain benefit from it.

The word "invention" is explained in I as follows.

- inventing; capacity of inventing
- sth invented

In II - An invention is 1.1 a machine, device, or system that has been invented by someone, or that is just being invented; 1.2 something untrue that someone wants you to believe; used showing disapproval.

- invention is 2.1 the act of inventing something that has never been made or used before; 2.2 the ability to invent things or to have clever and original ideas.

Comparison of the explanations in the dictionaries above will leave no doubt as to which dictionary can give the student a fuller meaning of the words "advantage" and "invention". Besides the student gets more information about the two words from the second dictionary, Collins English Language Dictionary. It is also more helpful because the entries are explained in full sentences. When properly used the dictionary will also in the long run have some effect on the students ability to write correct sentences.

## Conclusions

In teaching a foreign language, the teacher may not disregard the words used in his lessons although his attention is mainly directed to the teaching of structure. The student must be made aware of not only the



meaning of the whole sentences they are learning but also the meanings of the individual words. The teacher's neglect of the words will have a bad effect on the development of foreign language learning.

The time will come when he has to pay more attention to the teaching of words; and when it comes the teacher has to make the students always work with a dictionary in the hope that the student will feel that the dictionary is indispensable.

Although any dictionary can be used to help the student learn the meaning of words it is advisable to use a mono-lingual dictionary and a good mono-lingual dictionary can help the student not only to enlarge his vocabulary but also to improve his learning of the other aspects of the foreign language.